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NEGRO DRAMA IN AMERICA

by

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Chapter 1

The History of the Negro in the Theatre up to 1917

I, too, sing America.
I am the darker brother.
They send me to eat in the kitchen
When company comes.
But I laugh
And eat well
And grow strong.
Tomorrow
I'll sit at the table
When company comes.
Nobody'll dare
Say to me,
'Eat in the kitchen',
Then.
Besides, they'll see how beautiful I am
And be ashamed,---
I, too, am America.

In this poem, Langston Hughes, a contemporary Negro poet, while voicing the hope of his race, unconsciously expresses the present and future of Negro drama in America. This drama is still in its infancy, but within the past few years it has

given evidence of powers of which America has never dreamed. Its development has been disconnected and uneven, but, nevertheless, fairly continuous. At first the Negro was a type character appearing only in minstrelsy, and acting as he was expected to act, not as his soul dictated. Musical comedy was a step upward, but in this role the Negro made his main contributions in lithe bodily movements and in song. The Negro had more to offer than either of these two mediums required, and he is making his contribution today in the form of serious drama. We have a vital folk tradition in the Negro spirit and in Negro idioms which may become the corner stone of a native American art. This art, besides being a contribution to the literature of America, would be a great solvent of racial antagonisms. The life of the Negro has a certain quality common to our own. We envy their source of delight; their secret law of rhythm fascinates us; we are moved by their race personality. Negro music is the most original which this country has produced. The deep-toned melodies with notes of intolerable pathos reflect a background of tragedy. From this same highly imaginative, highly spiritual race, we can hope for an original and wholly native drama. America should realize and cultivate these peculiar gifts which will add to the glory of the country.

The history of the Negro in the theatre started with the career of Ira Aldrich, a Negro tragedian. There are differing accounts regarding his birth and early life, but James Weldon

Johnson, author of Black Manhattan, has constructed what appears to be a valid account of these early years. Ira Aldrich's father, Daniel, was the son of a Senegalese chief, and was sent to a college in New York by missionaries. He was to take Christianity back to his people, but he remained in America instead and became a Presbyterian preacher. Ira was born in 1807, probably in New York. He gained fame in England and on the continent for his characterization of Othello. There is no evidence that Ira Aldrich ever acted in America, except as a youth, and he is not directly concerned with the development of Negro drama.

The real beginning of Negro drama is in minstrelsy which came directly from the old southern plantations, flourished in the last twenty years of the nineteenth century, and was succeeded in the early twentieth century by musical comedy. On the old southern plantations it was not unusual for the Negroes to form small troupes which provided entertainment in the form of songs, jokes, and dances. The customary instruments were banjos and small bleached bones of sheep and other animals. The master of the plantation employed these Negroes to entertain his guests, and there is a record to the effect that at least one of these groups became semi-professional and travelled from one plantation to another. White actors quickly commercialized in minstrelsy by impersonating the Negroes, and the minstrel shows became a mere caricature of the typical happy-go-lucky, crap-shooting, gin-drinking, shuffling Negro. Single

black-face acts became popular, the most famous of which was Dan Rice's "Jump Jim Crow". Charles Cruso, a Negro, created the minstrel monologue. The first successful all-Negro company was the Georgia Minstrels founded by Charles Hicks in 1865. But he, a Negro, found it difficult to work with his own race, and the management was taken over more successfully by a white man. Gradually the minstrel was developed and elaborated until it became less and less an imitation of plantation life, and more and more a glorious spectacle. Minstrelsy is the only completely original contribution which America has made to the theatre, but its real importance lies in the stage and theatre experience which it gave to the Negroes themselves. A few of the famous minstrel Negroes succeeded in later years to higher roles in the legitimate theatre.[1]

Small travelling companies, the best of which had mainly musical programs, really preceded the minstrels, but they did not reach the peak of their development until several years after minstrelsy had died out. The Luca family, six talented Negroes consisting of a father, mother, and four sons, was just such a travelling company. They first sang at the Anniversary of the Anti-Slavery Society in 1853. Not until 1890, however, was a successful departure from strict minstrelsy made by a Negro. At this time, Sam T. Jack formed a colored girl show called Creole Show. It was patterned after the minstrel, but

1. Black Manhattan by James Weldon Johnson

it had no evidence of plantation influence. Musical comedies received their impetus from this show. Five years later John Isham advanced one step higher in this direction with his presentation of The Octoroons which consisted mainly of dances and songs. In 1896, Isham presented Oriental America still in minstrel pattern, but ending with an operatic medley. This was the first Negro musical show to play on Broadway. Another important contribution to the development of Negro musical comedies was made through a Negro stock company. This company was called Worth's Museum, and was headed by Bob Cole, a Negro student of the history of drama and the theatre. In 1898, a complete break was made from the minstrelsy pattern by Bob Cole's play A Trip to Coontown, the first real musical comedy worthy of that name. As a further distinction, it was the first colored show to be organized, produced, and managed by Negroes. In this same year, Will Marion Cook wrote the music for the show Clorindy--The Origin of the Cake Walk. This was a novelty because of the introduction of syncopated music.[2]

Contemporaneous with this gradual development of the musical comedy were the colored concert singers mostly women. The most famous of these was Sissieretta Jones, otherwise known as "Black Patti". "Black Patti's Troubadours" followed the idea of minstrelsy in general. She sang, but took no part in the show itself. Her group was the only Negro show which played

2. Black Manhattan by James Weldon Johnson

successfully in the South.

In 1900, The Sons of Ham, a musical farce, appeared featuring Bert Williams and Bob Walker. The show itself was not an overwhelming success, but the popularity of this couple was assured. They were the strongest Negro theatrical combination yet assembled. Walker took the part of the sleek, smiling dandy; Williams was the slow-witted, good-natured darky, unequalled in the art of pantomine. Ironically enough, Bert Williams has gone down in Negro theatrical history as one of America's great comedians. His life is an example of the white man's relegation of the Negro to the realm of a vaudeville comedian. Williams had the gift of making people laugh, but he had a far more powerful gift which he was never permitted to employ because of what he termed 'an American phase'.[4] This American phase, as Williams explains it, is a blindness which keeps Americans from recognizing that the Negro has a soul which can bring life to his own drama, which can lift it higher in the direction of progress because of a novel contribution. Bert Williams nursed a secret sorrow, that of supressed genius, and he died facing the bitter fact that although he had attained prosperity and success on the American stage, his talents were never fully developed as he wished them to be.

3. Black Manhattan by James Weldon Johnson

4. Genius Defeated by Race Literary Digest 72:28-9 March 25, 1922.

Another partnership of the Williams-Walker type was that of Cole and Johnson. This couple were not such fun makers, but their plays were better written, and they employed a younger and prettier chorus. The careers of these four men were ended suddenly and almost simultaneously, and this loss was followed by a pause in the slow but steady climb of the Negro in the theatre.

Chapter 2

Negro Plays by White Authors Since 1917

1917 is an important date in the history of Negro drama, for it marks the beginning of a new movement which is still going on. After the decline of musical comedy, there was a pause of about a decade during which there were neither Negro actors nor Negro dramas which were of any significance. During this period, the Negro was literally exiled from the New York theatres. As a result of this exile, a real Negro theatre grew up in Harlem with Negro performers and audience. Under this entirely new atmosphere the Negro was for the first time freed from the restriction which the white man had placed on him. Love scenes had never been allowed in the presence of a mixed audience, but now, in his own theatre, the Negro could present anything from crude burlesque to serious drama. This intermediate period, although it produced nothing in the way of drama itself, was a fresh start for the Negro.

On April 5, 1917, Plays for a Negro Theatre by Ridgely Torrence were presented by the Colored Players at the Garden Theatre in Madison Square, New York. Although these were written by a white man, it was the first time that Negro actors had commanded the serious attention of the American critics, public, and press. There were three plays, The Rider of Dreams,

Granny Maumee, and Simon, The Cyrenian, varying in type and affording the Negro a wide range of dramatic interpretation. They were produced by Mrs. Emily Hapgood, who had faith in the ability of the Negro to make a place for himself on the stage.

Ridgely Torrence was born in Xenia, Ohio, November 27, 1875. These three plays and The Danse Calinda are at present his only contributions to the Negro theatre. The Danse Calinda is a very shortplay, consisting mainly of a pantomine with folk music.

The Rider of Dreams is a comedy of Negro folk life. Lucy Sparrow is a woman of forty whose greatest concern is that of bringing up her son, Booker, to obey the Commandments and to be satisfied with the simple things of life. Her husband, Madison, is ambitious, but over-anxious for immediate material success. As the play opens, Lucy is repeating the seventh Commandment to Booker after she catches him stealing mush. Madison enters and defends his son, only because, as is revealed later, he is guilty of a similar offence-- that of stealing money and a guitar. Uncle Williams is aware of these thefts, and exacts many promises of reform from Madison. Although the plot is trivial, the dialogue is beautiful, being almost poetical in places. When describing the dream in which a horse showed him some money, Madison's speech rises above plain prose:

"On I gits an' off he goes, slick as a rancid transom car.

Comes to high hill lookin' down on de sun an' moon, Hoss stop an' say,

'Brung you heah to give you noos
De worl' is youahn to pick an' choose'.[5]

Madison's last words are really typical of his whole race, when in response to his wife's warning to keep from getting mixed up with white men, he says, "All I wants is room to dream my good dreams an' make my own music".[6]

The second play of this group, Granny Maumee, is a tragedy which ends in a scene of voodoo enchantment. Granny is a little, old, black woman, with a face scarred by burns which she received years before in an attempt to save her son, Sammy, who was burned for a murder which he did not commit. As the play opens, Granny is making up a bed for her great-grandaughter, Sapphie, and her baby boy. Granny is sentimental about the bed because it was a present from Sammy, and she has no intention of letting Sapphie's husband sleep in it. Sapphie arrives with her baby which is white, but Granny's blindness prevents her from seeing this. Lightfoot, the baby's father is coming later. Suddenly Granny regains her vision enough to see that the baby is white. Her old African superstitions come to the fore, and as Sapphie and her sister, Pearl, stand hypnotized, she seizes some burning coals and puts them into

5. The Rider of Dreams by Ridgely Torrence
6. ibid.

a brazier. She makes a figure of Lightfoot out of wax and starts to burn it. A vision of Sammy appears and begs Granny to forgive the white men who murdered him. Under the spell of this vision, Granny slowly changes, stops her strange chantings and rhythmic dances, forgives Sapphie and Lightfoot, and dies. Granny is the only strong character in the play, and the scene of voodooism is the real highspot. Sapphie is characterized through the whole play by the words with which she excuses her weakness: "He des would have his way", and Pearl is a mere shadow of her older, more experienced sister.

The third play, Simon, The Cyrenian, is a drama depicting the black cross-bearer of Jesus. All the characters in the play are represented by persons entirely or partly of Negro blood. Simon is a full-blooded Negro, and the attendants comprise both mulattoes and Negroes. The play has no real plot; it is simply a presentation of the procession toward Calvary, and dwells mainly on Simon's reluctance at being compelled to carry the cross of Jesus.

These plays mark the beginning of the present period of the Negro in the theatre , a period which was interrupted for a time by the war, but which has since been carried on with ever increasing success.

In 1919, two years after the plays of Ridgely Torrence had been presented, Eugene O'Neill, who had been experimenting with the dramatic possibilities of the Negro, brought forth

The Dreamy Kid. This play was followed by The Emperor Jones in 1920, and All God's Chillun Got Wings in 1923. The Dreamy Kid is too obvious, too direct, and too melodramatic to be wholly convincing. The action takes place in contemporary New York where Mammy Saunders, an old colored woman, lies dying. In spite of the fact that the spirit of death and suspense is in the air, the room conveys a sense of brightness and cheerfulness and the bed is covered with a gaudy red and yellow quilt. Mammy is constantly calling for Dreamy, her grandson, ignorant of the fact that he is hiding from the police because he killed a white man in self defense. When Dreamy finally comes, Mammy is delirious. She reminisces about Dreamy's babyhood, and makes him promise to stay with her until she dies. Dreamy promises and the play ends in suspense as the police silently approach and Dreamy grimly determines that they shall never take him alive. This play, like all Negro plays, is interspersed with ejaculations such as "O Lawd" and "Jesus". Such utterances would sound sacriligious in a white play, but they seem entirely natural to the Negroes.

The Emperor Jones established Eugene O'Neill as a "regular dramatist". This play is almost entirely in dramatic monologue, and "unfolds in reverse order the tragical epic of the American Negro".[7] O'Neill got the idea from an old circus man who told him a story current in Haiti about the late President Sam.

7. Eugene O'Neill by Barrett H. Clark

Sam told his people that they would never kill him with a lead bullet, because he would get himself first with a silver one. For a long time, O'Neill worked this idea over in his mind, and finally conceived the incident of the forest. But he did not see how the woods could be represented on the stage. He had read of the religious feasts in the Congo, and the use of the drum there--- how it starts at a normal pulse and is slowly intensified until the heartbeat of everyone present corresponds to the frenzied beat of the drum. The dramatist in O'Neill could not resist making this the central theme of his play. The tropical forest was largely a result of prospecting for gold in Spanish Hondurus. The Emperor Jones is a single theme stated and restated, the portrayal of a hunted man. It is a series of sharply defined pictures culminating in panic and destruction. Jones reveals himself at once as a sharp contrast to the white man, Smithers. As usual when dealing with Negroes, O'Neill tends to present the black characters as stronger willed and finer principled than the white characters. This play has been one of O'Neill's most successful in the theatre. In the composition of it he was not dealing with a well-worn subject, indeed he was handling something entirely uncommon to American drama. The use of the drum was not a mere stunt, it was a creative incident, as were the reappearing "formless fears". O'Neill was working with something new and untried, and he was successful in showing the possibilities of a truly native American drama. The success of The Emperor Jones was

undoubtedly due in large measure to the acting of Charles Gilpin in the title role. Gilpin was voted by the Drama League as one of the ten persons who had done most for the American theatre during the year. That was less than twenty years ago, and yet there was considerable resentment of the fact that a colored person should be so awarded, and especially of the fact that Gilpin was invited to attend the dinner given in honor of the ten chosen. In spite of this feeling, Mr. Gilpin did attend the dinner.

The third play of Eugene O'Neill which deals with the Negro is All God's Chillun Got Wings which was produced in 1923. This play involves the marriage of a Negro, Jim Harris, to a white girl, Ella Downey. The play opens with a scene of their childhood, and shows how innocently fond of each other they were. Jim retains this affection, but as Ella grows older she realizes the significance of Jim's color and she gradually drifts away from him. Jim is ambitious to be a lawyer, and his studies occupy most of his time, but Ella gets in with the wrong crowd and consequently into trouble. Jim finally persuades her to marry him, and they go away to forget everything. They seem unable to find real happiness, however, and they soon return. Ella now feels inferior to Jim and becomes obsessed with the idea that she must keep him from passing the bar examinations. Jim gradually realizes that her mind is affected, and he is unable to study. The play ends with Jim's decision to give up his studies and devote his whole attention to Ella whom he now

treats as a child.

All God's Chillun Got Wings created a furore before it was even produced. It was first published in the American Mercury, and immediately a controversy began in the newspapers as to whether a white girl should play opposite a colored boy. The scene which was especially objected to was the one where Ella kisses Jim's hand. Mrs. W. J. Arnold, a founder of the Daughters of the Confederacy, was quoted in the papers as saying: "The scene where Miss Blair is called upon to kiss and fondle a Negro's hand is going too far even for the stage. The play may be produced above the Mason and Dixie (sic) line, but Mr. O'Neill will not get the friendly reception he had when he sent Emperor Jones his other colored play into the South. The play should be banned by the authorities, because it will be impossible for it to do otherwise than stir up ill feeling between the races".[8] But in spite of these attacks, the play proceeded before a crowded theatre without any antagonism on the part of the audience. This play was not the great success that The Emperor Jones had been, as Mrs. Arnold predicted, but only for the reason that it is not so good a play. All God's Chillun Got Wings resembles The Emperor Jones in that it is a study of the effects of racial fears, prejudices, and differences on individuals.

These three plays are O'Neill's main contribution to the

8. Black Manhattan by James Weldon Johnson p. 194.

Negro drama of America, and they show his interest in the black race. "To the members of this race he was always ready to grant a hidden spring of beauty in character that he denied to the dominant white."[9] The Dreamy Kid allows himself to be captured rather than forego a visit to his dying mother; Emperor Jones is decidedly superior to the white man, Smithers; Jim Harris is an ambitious Negro held back by a common, low-morraled, white girl. But in these plays, as in so many of his others, O'Neill has the tendency to end in madness. There is evidence too of a striving for the new and different.

"The one-act play is a fine vehicle for something poetical, for something spiritual in feeling that cannot be carried through a long play."[10] The majority of Negro plays so far have been one-act plays, and in this field Paul Green is undoubtedly foremost. Among his first plays is White Dresses written in 1921. This play involves the love of Mary McLean, a black girl, for Hugh Morgan, the white son of her landlord. Mary has repeatedly refused to marry Jim Matthews,because he is smut black. Mr. Morgan, the landlord, threatens to make Mary and her grandmother leave their home unless Mary agrees to marry Jim. He brings Mary a present of a white dress, not realizing that it is from his son. Granny sees the dress, and shows Mary another white dress that Mr. Morgan sent Mary's mother nineteen years

9. Playwrights of the American Theatre by Thomas H. Dickinson p. 117.

10. Eugene O'Neill by Barrett Clark

before. Granny burns both dresses, and Mary's silence is an admission that she has no alternative now but to marry Jim. Paul Green was the first dramatist to take this theme, almost as old as literature itself, and make it live in dramatic form.

In this same year, 1921, The Hot Iron was produced. One forgets that the characters are Negroes in this affecting one-act play, with scarcely an episode for the plot. Tilsy McNeill, a washerwoman, deserted by her husband, is struggling to keep her home and children. As she is ironing one day, her husband, Will, returns. He attempts to beat their little boy, Charlie, and in desperation Tilsy hits him over the head with her hot iron, killing him. The dramatic element is simple, but the author has animated his characters with their sufferings and made the reader understand them.

The year 1924 brought forth four more plays by Paul Green, the No Count Boy, The Prayer Meeting, The End of the Row, and Your Fiery Furnace. The No 'Count Boy is an appealing and delightfully poetic play. It was the prize winner in the National Little Theatre Tournament in 1925. The action of the play takes place in contemporary New York near Cape Fear River. Enos, a stocky young Negro flashily dressed, calls to take Pheelie to ride in his boss's horse and carriage. Pheelie is dreamily interested in "white folk's" books and in travel, and she has no interest in Enos's low ambition nor even in the house which he is planning to build for her. While they are talking, a boy

of about seventeen, barefooted and raggedly dressed, enters and starts to play a small mouth organ. Pheelie becomes interested in the boy, and listens to him while he tells her of his travels. Then he plays a sad song about a dying daughter, and Pheelie is so entranced by him that she tells Enos to leave. The boy nearly persuades Pheelie to travel along with him, when Enos returns prepared to fight. Suddenly a woman enters and claims the boy as her feeble-minded son. Pheelie sobs as the youth is led away, and Enos comforts her. The language is almost poetical in this play where the boy is describing his travels to the wide-eyed, sympathetic Pheelie: "You don't know nothing 'bout traveling, does you? I sleeps on de warm ground. Come sunset, Istops in a hollow and breaks down bushes and rakes up pinestraw and sleeps lak a log. And in de mawning I wakes up and sees de jew on everything and heahs de birds singing and practice on my harp. Den I's off down de road breaving de fine air and feeling des as happy as I kin".[11] In this speech, the boy somehow expresses not only his own and Pheelie's desires, but the feeling of his whole race when their native instinct is unrepressed. This play has no social problem to present, no sad tale of the downtrodden race trying to escape white man's tyranny, but only the dreams of one Negro girl. The dreams take on the essence of tragedy because Pheelie is not representative of her race. She is among the few who have ambition

11. <u>In the Valley and Other Carolina Folk Plays</u> by Paul Green p. 195.

to obtain what other men, regardless of color, can obtain, but ~~but~~ she is ahead of her time and destined to marry a man who cannot understand her intellectual side. The tragedy does not become acute, because Pheelie's dream is shattered when the boy's identity is discovered. Paul Green was the first playwright to seize on this theme as good dramatic material for Negro drama.

The Prayer Meeting, as its name denotes, is a play with a religious theme. Granny, a pious, old, colored woman, has gone away for the weekend, and her grandaughters are celebrating her absence by inviting their young friends in to a prayer meeting. These meetings usually end in drunken parties which would be a shocking revelation to Granny. In the midst of the prayer meeting, just as it is beginning to lose most of its religious pretense, Granny returns. In a blind rage, she drives the guests from her home. Lorrina, her oldest grandaughter, brazenly goes with them, but her younger sister remains behind to comfort their grandmother and beg forgiveness.

The End of the Row and Your Fiery Furnace are both folk tragedies, and both concern ambitious Negroes struggling to obtain an education. In the former, a young Negro girl, Lallie, is trying to rise above her companions. They have nothing but contempt for her ambitions, and Aunt Zella, who is older than the rest, tries to reason with her. But Lallie is determined to study, and she seeks encouragement from her white landlord

with whom she is in love. Lallie finally gives up her struggle when she realizes that he is only giving her a half-hearted support and has little interest in her determination to educate herself. In Your Fiery Furnace, the ambitious Negro is a middle-aged man. Like Lallie he does little more than express his ambitions and receives no encouragement from his family or friends.

The Man Who Died at Twelve O'clock and In Aunt Mahaly's Cabin were written in 1925. Both of these employ the supernatural and Negro superstition. The former deals with January Evans, a hard-drinking, old Negro, who refuses to let his grandaughter, Sally, have her own inheritance and marry a young boy, Charlie McFarland. The two young people finally decide to trick him into consent. Sally remembers that the old man has had a vision of a devil coming for him some night at twelve o'clock. Charlie dresses up as the Devil, and waits for January who finally appears, very drunk. The Devil comes for him, and January falls into a dead faint. When he recovers his senses, he is convinced that he died and has now been given another chance on earth to redeem himself. Of course the ruse works in favor of the young people. The plot of this play is undoubtedly weird and improbable, but the superstitions of old January are played upon so effectively that the result is convincing. Paul Green shows his ability here to seize on the dramatic situation and develop it to the utmost.

In Aunt Mahaly's Cabin likewise seizes on the dramatic situation and develops it. This time it concerns two Negro murderers who attempt to hide in a haunted cabin and are brought to ruin by the goblins of the swamp in such forms as the "Black Dog", "Raw-Head-and-Bloody-Bones", and "The Ghost of a Murdered Man".

Supper For the Dead, like The Man Who Died at Twelve O'clock, has a title which in itself incites curiosity. It takes place in Cape Fear River swamp in eastern North Carolina. It is just after sunset, the dusk is gradually thickening, and the swamp owls are beginning to call. Fess Oxendine, a powerful Croatan Negro, is looking morosely at the sky when the play opens. His wife, Vonie, enters, dirty, ragged, and with one eye missing. Fess snarls at her and threatens her with a knife, and we learn then that he is the cause of her one-eyed state. Vonie talks about their murdered daughter, and mentions that Aunt Queenie is coming. Queenie proves to be an unbelievably ancient Negress. She has twin daughters with bodily movements and eyes greatly resembling snakes, who repeat after her everything that she says. Queenie goes in to a trance-like state, and chants as she mixes a magic potion. Finally she calls forth the murdered child, Miny. At the sight of Miny, Fess breaks down and admits that he was the cause of his own daughter's ruin and consequently her drowning. Vonie, in an insane rage, fires several bullets into Fess's back as Queenie and the uncanny twins disappear through the door. In this play

Paul Green shows himsel to be non-sentimental and non-sociological, but an artist seeing beauty and tragedy in the deep, moving struggle of human beings. If he exaggerates the ecstacy of religion, the power of fear and hate, or the innate sense of superstition, it is because he is not trying to give a simple, faithful picture of lowly life, but only to interpret dramatically that which appeals to him. Thus Queenie dramatizes the whole situation when she mixes the potion and chants such lines as:

"Black snake ile and rain-crow aig,
Puts de stren'th in the ghostes laig.
Make um power of muscle and bone-
Come up, Miny, hyuh's yo' own."[12]

In Abraham's Bosom was not produced until 1926. It is a tragedy of universal quality, and undoubtedly Paul Green's best contribution to Negro drama. It is a beautiful although a terrible play, closer to real Negro life and probing deeper into it than any drama up to this date. Of the twelve characters in this play ten were colored, two were white. The play was a decided success, and in 1927 it was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for being the original American play which best represented the educational value and power of the stage. This play is the story of a Negro's effort to better himself by education. Mr. Green presents the problem, but he makes no

12. In the Valley and Other Carolina Folk Plays by Paul Green p. 97.

attempt to solve it. The plot is as follows: Abe is a young Negro working in a turpentine wood of eastern North Carolina. He is a slow worker, and he spends every spare minute reading. He is ambitious to start a school for children of his own race, but can receive the support of no one. He pleads this cause with Colonel McCranie, the overseer who is also his father, but receives no encouragement from him. Goldie, a young mulatto woman, soothes Abe and tries to make him forget his disappointment. Three years pass, and Abe has his schoolbut he is unable to make a go of it. He is now married to Goldie, and they have a son, Douglas, in whom Abe places his own unrealized hopes. As the years pass, Abe wanders from place to place trying to arouse an interest among the people in education for the Negro. Douglas grows up in to a worthless, dissipated youth, and Abe disowns him in disgust. Goldie is worn out with work, but she still has faith in Abe. Abe makes one last attempt at establishing a Negro school and is opposed by his white half-brother, Lonnie, the Colonel's son. Abe kills him in a fit of anger. He is followed home by the white mob and shot by them even as he attempts a final useless plea. In this play Paul Green has embodied in Abe all the hopes and ambitions of the younger generation of Negroes who have sought to raise their people out of the ranks of the downtrodden. Abe realizes what he has to combat in the way of superstition and innate laziness, but he struggles unceasingly. He refuses to be discouraged by his own mother's assertion that "white is white and black is black

and Gohd made de white to allus be bedder'n de black".[13] But even as he goes to his death, Abe realizes that the only salvation of the Negro is to have freedom, "freedom of the soul and of the mind".[14]

Paul Green has also written two symphonic plays of the Negro people. Potter's Field which was written in 1931 takes place in a valley near a white folk's town, in a Negro settlement called Potter's Field. Roll Sweet Chariot which was written in 1934 and has not yet been published is a melodramatic symphony of which the music is an integral part.

Paul Green is the white dramatist who interprets the Southern Negro. He not only gives a picture of their lowly life of squalor and sin, and their primitive ecstasy in religion and sex, but he presents beneath all this the human significance of struggle, and the tragedy of defeat.

These three playwrights, Ridgely Torrence, Eugene O'Neill, and Paul Green have done more than any other dramatists in the way of contributions to the Negro theatre. Torrence and O'Neill were influenced by their recognition of fine dramatic material in the character of the Negro. To them, it was something new and untried and it had apparent possibilites of dramatic success. Paul Green had lived near and observed the

13. In Abraham's Bosom by Paul Green
14. ibid.

Negroes, and he wrote about them because he knew them intimately and wanted other people to know more about them. He, like O'Neill and Torrence, saw the dramatic possibilities in this race, but, unlike these two, he did not write with his eye wholly on the white man's stage.

Among the best loved characters yet to make an appearance in the Negro theatre is that of Porgy created by Du Bose Heyward aided by his wife, Dorothy. Porgy is the crippled beggar of Catfish Row who has overcome his handicap with the aid of a soap-box cart on lopsided wheels. The play opens with one of the weekly crap games characteristic of Catfish Row. In the course of this game, a young Negro, Robbins, is killed by Crown, a huge Negro stevedore from the cotton wharves. The next scene shows the dead Robbins surrounded by his singing, swaying friends while money for his burial is being collected in a saucer--just another "saucer-buried Nigger". Crown disappears, and "his woman", Bess goes to live with Porgy. For the next few months Porgy is happier than he has ever been in his life, and his very expression shows that he now has something to live for. Crown returns, however, and comes for Bess. Rather than give her up, Porgy kills Crown. Although he is suspected of the murder, nothing can be proved, and he is only called to identify Crown's body. He comes back from this only to discover that Bess has disappeared. In the next few minutes Porgy seems to lose all the vitality and ambition of the past months, and he becomes once again merely an old, crippled beggar with no pur-

pose in life but to beg alms. Porgy is a folk-play of simple, Negro fishermen, and it is suffused with Negro humour. There have been few scenes in the New York theatre which have equalled in emotional power that of the wake held for Serina's husband, Robbins. In this scene, the whole room sways and sings in a religious frenzy making black shadows against a white background.

On February 26, 1930, Marc Connelly's Green Pastures was produced. Its success was due to a sudden stimulated interest in Negro contributions to American drama. It was barred from only one town, Lubock, West Texas, because of racial prejudice. In 1935 it had its fifth anniversary in New York with Richard B. Harrison still playing the part of "De Lawd". This play is the country Negro's idea of heaven presented in a simple, humble, beautifully unaffected manner. The singing, done by the Hall Johnson choir, was a valuable asset to the play, serving to blend the separate scenes into one whole. Green Pastures was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for 1929 and widely acclaimed by all white people. According to Ralf Coleman, director of the Federal Theatre Negro Company, it was not considered such a success by the Negroes themselves. It was originally intended to be comedy, he said, but Richard Harrison raised it from that rank. He was the only actor who could justify the Lawd, and Rex Ingram in that role was just another Negro preacher. In the author's note, Connelly states that "the religion is that of thousands of Negroes in the deep South". Ralf Coleman,

himself a Negro, maintains that this religion is not prevalent among the Negroes, although he admits that it may exist in one small sect.

In 1934, They Shall Not Die by John Wexley appeared. Although the author insists that his characters and the story are fictional, the play is undoubtedly a dramatization of the Scottsboro case in which nine colored boys were convicted of the crime of rape. In this play Wexley shows how the boys wage a losing battle in maintaining their innocence. It is a frankly propagandistic play in which no detail of inhumanity, prejudice, or injustice is omitted. One revolts against the painful brutality, but Wexley writes with burning indignation. Of course no great play can be produced when written in such heat, and this may account for the poor beginning where the author is carried away with his subject. There is a rise in the ending when Wexley has exhausted his fire, and masterfully sums up the case with the hand of an artist and a true dramatist. Langston Hughes spoke briefly about the case in connection with a poem called Ozzie Powell which he has written about it. He said that the boys are still in prison, having spent several months in the death house. Two of the nine are suffering from what is known as prison insanity. Today these boys are being given another trial.

Among the minor writers of Negro plays is John W. Rogers, author of Judge Lynch. In this play, a Negro has been accused

of murdering Squire Tatum and then stealing his watch. This Negro is now being hunted in the woods. Mrs. Joplin and her daughter-in -law, Ella, are discussing the murder when a stranger appears and tries to sell them a cure-all medicine. While he is talking, Ed Joplin, Ella's husband returns and tells of the capture and hanging of the Negro. The stranger is uneasy, but Mrs. Joplin attributes this to his horror at the story of the lynching. The stranger leaves, and as Ella searches the ground for sticks, she discovers the Squire's gold watch.

Thelma Duncan is another of the minor playwrights. Her play, The Death Dance, takes place in the African Jungle on the eve of a court palaver. Kamo has been accused of stealing gold and is to be given the red water ordeal to test his innocence. Asumana dances for the medicine man and makes him promise to save Kamo. Aliku realizes that the medicine man will not save Kamo, but he is in love with Asuman so he fixes the medicine so as to make Kamo sick but not kill him. He then discloses the medicine man's tricks to the natives.

Mr. Ernest Culbertson has aided Negro drama by two of his one-act plays. Mr. Culbertson became interested in Negro life during his residence in Washington, D. C. where he began his career as a newspaper man. He is now a resident of New York where, since 1920, he has been a professional playwright. His first play Goat Alley was performed by an amateur group of

Negro actors who gave a very successful performance. Rackey, a play about a cruel, domineering young Negro who was considerably tamed after four years of service in the war, was produced in 1920. These two plays were among the pioneer efforts that showed the artistic possibilities of Negro plays and Negro actors.

Mr. Richard Bruce has written one Negro play of a quite different type. It is Sahdji, an African ballet, which takes place in ancestral Central Africa during a hunting feast of the Azandé tribe. This play is a fanciful and colorful bit with a chanter booming out proverbial sayings and all other action concentrated in dance pantomine.

The Bird Child by Lucy White, a southern white woman, was written in 1922. It is the story of a white man confronted with the problem of caring for a young black girl. He is about to refuse to do this, when he learns that the child is his own.

These plays represent the white man's contribution to the Negro theatre. With the exception of a few one-act plays, the material undoubtedly attracted the dramatists as something different and colorful for theatrical presentation. They were not written primarily with a view to encouraging a native Negro drama. However, they have been successful in attracting the attention of the audiences to the fact that this is a new and vitally American innovation in the dramatic world. Although

these plays exceed those by Negro authors both in number and success, it is undoubtedly with the Negroes themselves that the future of this drama lies. To qoute Fredrika Bremer: "The romance of your history is the fate of the Negro. Paul Green, Eugene O'Neill, and Marc Connelly see the possibilities, but they misunderstand the Negro because they cannot think black".[15]

15. The Negro in Contemporary American Literature by Elizabeth Lay Green

Chapter 3

Negro Plays by Negro Authors Since 1917

The first successful drama written by a Negro and with an entirely Negro supporting cast was a three-act play, Rachel, by Angelina Grimké. It was first produced in March 1916 with the announcement that it was an "attempt to use the stage for race propaganda in order to enlighten the American people relative to the lamentable condition of ten millions of colored citizens in this free republic".[16] Although the play itself is not available, there is an article about it by Lillie Buffum Wyman entitled "Angelina W. Grimke's Drama of Rachel and the Lynching Evil". In this article she describes the play as a "beautiful, poetic creation". The play is the story of the Loving family of which the father and brother have been lynched by white church members. This tragic incident has left its mark on the daughter, Rachel, and although she loves children, she makes a strange vow never to be a mother and have her children suffer. Throughout the play, she is haunted by visions of her unborn children, but she feels that it is better for them to remain mere visions than risk the chance of being victims to white man's inhumanity. As a propagandistic motion, the

16. Plays of Negro Life compiled by Alain Locke and Montgomery Gregory p.414.

play was not a success, but it was instrumental in promoting a purely artistic approach to the field of Negro drama.

Willis Richardson is one of the most prolific of the younger Negro playwrights. He was born on November 5, 1889, in Wilmington, North Carolina. Besides numerous plays which are still in manuscript, the plays which have been produced are as follows:

The Deacon's Awakening written in 1920

The Chip Woman's Fortune written in 1922

Mortgaged written in 1923

The Broken Banjo this play received the first prize in the Crisis contest in 1925.

Compromise written in 1925

The Flight of the Natives written in 1926

The Chip Woman's Fortune is the story of an old, colored woman who makes her living by picking up chips of wood and selling them. When the play opens Aunt Nancy is living with the Green family caring for the sick wife, Liza. Silas Green comes home with the news that he is in danger of losing his job if they do not pay some of their debts. He supects Aunt Nancy of having some money hidden away, and demands that she give it to them. Aunt Nancy surprises them by announcing that she is saving the money for her son who is soon to be released from prison. The men arrive for the money owed them at the same time as the son, Jim, arrives from prison, and Jim insists that Aunt Nancy give Silas half the money which

proves to be more than enough to pay the debt.

The Broken Banjo is a folk tragedy, the action of which takes place in a tenament room in a Negro district. Mat Turner's one passion is his banjo, although he is by no means a good player. When his brother-in-law breaks the banjo, Mat is ready to kill him in a fit of anger. Sam stops him, however, by mentioning "old man Skelton's" murder. Mat had not realized that anyone suspected him of the murder, and now in terror he makes Sam promise to keep it a secret. Sam secretly tells the police that Mat is guilty of the crime, and he is led away to prison.

The Flight of the Natives takes place in a slave cabin in the year 1860. Mose, a powerful Negro, is to be sold down the river for threatening his master with a whip. Rather than suffer that, he plans his escape with several other Negro men and women. Having tricked the slave owner into searching in the wrong direction, they all depart in the opposite direction in their valiant break for freedom.

The other three plays The Deacon's Awakening, Mortgaged, and Compromise are not available.

Frank Wilson is another youthful Negro playwright, although his contributions to the field have not been so numerous. His one published play, Sugar Cane, was the Opportunity prize play for 1925. Sugar Cane, a young Negro girl, is the mother of a

two-year-old baby. Howard Hill is suspected of being the father, but a white boy, Lee Drayton, really is. Sugar Cane's father tries to kill Howard and she pleads with him, telling him whose baby Ora really is. Howard hears this, and kills Lee. Sugar Cane is nearly frantic at this, for it is fatal for a Negro to kill a white man. Fate is kind, however, for immediately following the murder, Lee's home is burned, and Lee is so badly scarred in death that Howard is never even suspected.

Balo, A Sketch of Negro Life was written in 1922 by Jean Toomer, a young colored writer. The drama is representative of the peasant life in contemporary Georgia, which the author observed while living there. It was this experience which he claims opened to him the possibilities of the folk material of the South. There is practically no plot to this one-act play, Balo. It is rather a brief portrayal of the spiritual soul of the young Negro farmer, Balo. He is carried away by a spasm of religious ecstasy which ends in violent and spasmodic sobbing as he bewails his sins.

John Matheus, author of the play, Cruiter, is considered one of the most promising writers of the "young Negro group". He was born in Keiper, West Virginia, and educated there and at Columbia University. He has been a teacher since 1922 at West Virginia Collegiate Institute. The play, Cruiter, deals with the migration of Negro labor from the South in the year

1918. The plot is briefly as follows: Sonny and his wife, Sissy, both in their early twenties, are easily persuaded to desert their home for the opportunities pictured to them in the North. Old Granny, a typical Negro Mammy, is sceptical, however. The children persuade her to leave urged on by the white recruiter's promises, but when the final moment for departure comes, Granny becomes firm in her resolve to stay behind, and she is left with her little dog, Berry, as the grandchildren leave preceded by the recruiter.

There are two outstanding women authors among the Negro dramatists, Mrs. Georgia Douglas Johnson and Miss Eulalie Spence. Mrs. Johnson was born in Atlanta, Georgia in 1886. She is better known as a poet having published "The Heart of a Woman and Other Poems". She is also the author of two plays, Blue Blood and Plumes, the latter of which won first prize in the Opportunity Contest in 1927. Plumes is a folk tragedy which takes place in a poor cottage in the South. Charity, the Negro mother, is watching her little girl die, because she has no faith in the white doctor's prescriptions. Charity is faced with the necessity of deciding whether or not the doctor shall operate. The operation which is a mere chance, would take all the money Charity has been saving as a guarantee that her baby shall have a "shore-nuff funeral, everything grand,-- with plumes! "[17] Charity has practically decided on the funeral when the little girl dies.

17. Plumes by Georgia Douglas Johnson

Blue Blood, although it has been published, was not available to me.

Eulalie Spence is a native of Brooklyn, New York. She was educated a t the New York Training School for Teachers, and has taken special courses in English at the College of the City of New York and Columbia University. She now teaches Education in the Eastern District High School in Brooklyn. She is the author of The Hunch, a comedy of Harlem life, which won second prize in the Opportunity Contest in 1927. The Starter was also a prize winner in the 1927 contest. This play takes place in present-day Harlem on a summer evening. Thomas Jefferson Keeley, a tall, dapper Negro youth proposes to his girl friend, Georgia. She immediately questions him about his bank account and salary, and Thomas gradually loses all desire to marry. The play ends with the youth uneasily changing the subject and telling Georgia to "forget it".

One of the most significant events of the New York season in 1933, was a Negro folk play written by a Negro. This play was Run Little Chillun, and the author was Hall Johnson. The play was hailed by critics as the nearest approach of any play ever written to expressing the elemental racial character of the Negro. The play was a melodrama, and like its predecessors, did little more than indicate the possibilities of its subject matter. But two religious scenes in the play were very impressive and stirring. The play is as yet un pub-

lished.

Foremost among the young dramatists of the Negro colleges in the South is Randolph Edmonds, teacher of English and dramatic director in Morgan College, Baltimore. Mr. Edmonds knows the life of the Negro intimately; his parents were born slaves. He himself was born in the little village of Lawrenceville, Virginia in 1900. He received his Master's Degree from Columbia University in 1932. At first he was interested in highly imaginative writing, but on reading Paul Green's Lonesome Road, a collection of one-act plays, he became deeply interested in Negro peasant drama. Edmond's volume of plays which he entitled "Six Plays for a Negro Theatre" consists of one-act plays intended primarily for use in the Negro Little Theatres. The plays are: Bad Man, Old Man Pete, Nat Turner, Breeders, Bleeding Hearts, and The New Window.

Bad Man is a folk play of saw-mill life. The characters are briefly portrayed as typical saw-mill Negroes, with the exception of one, Thea Dugger, a veritable giant, mean and hard-looking, of whom the rest of the workers stand in awe. Maybelle, a sister of one of the workers, is visiting the camp one day when an alarm is sounded that a white mob is coming in pursuit of one of the mill Negroes suspected of killing a white man. The Negroes gather in one cabin in an attempt to escape the mob who demand the guilty one. Rather than risk Maybelle's life, Thea, the bad man of the camp, surrenders,

although he is not guilty of the murder.

Nat Turner is a dramatized story of the Nat Turner insurrection in 1831 in which a band of slaves fought for their freedom.

Old Man Pete has a different theme from the other plays. It takes place in a cozy little flat in modern Harlem. The Collier children have all been successful in Harlem, and have insisted that their father and mother sell their farm in Virginia and come North to live with their children. Now that the parents have arrived, the children find that they are ashamed of their parent's old clothes, lack of manners, and especially of their Negro southern dialect. All these things seem out of place and very far removed from Negro Harlem. The children argue about who shall look after the old people, and in a fit of anger, one of the daughters-in-law insults Pete and Mandy, the parents. The ending is a trifle unconvincing when Pete and Mandy start for Virginia on a cold winter's night without telling their children, and freeze to death in Central Park. The theme of this play, although an old one in stories and dramas of white people, is an innovation with Negro characters.

The play Breeders has also a new and untried theme. It takes place in an old, dilapidated slave's cabin. Mammy's two sons have been "sold down the river", and only her daughter, Ruth, is left her. Ruth is in love with a young slave boy,

David, and wishes to marry him. The overseer, however, has already picked a husband for her. This melodramatic play ends tragically with David's death, after a fight with the overseer, and Ruth's suicide in an effort to avoid an undesired husband.

Bleeding Hearts is a folk tragedy woven around the death of a colored woman whose husband is refused permission to see her in the last moments of her life by the hard-hearted plantation owner.

The New Window is about the death of a Negro bootlegger. He has just cut a new window in the front of his house to enable him to see anyone approaching, and his wife warns him that a new window always means death. True to her prophecy, the husband is killed to avenge the murder of a man whom he had recently killed.

These six plays by Randolph Edmonds, published in 1934, are probably the first of their type to be offered to the public. They are the result of the new movement in the Negro colleges of the South which promises much toward an authentic Negro drama.

The plays by these Negro authors represent the sum of all that the Negro himself has thus far accomplished in the dramatic field. The published plays are few in number, short in length, and tend toward one general theme, but they at least represent a beginning, and having begun, the Negro has un-

limited possibiliteis before him. Without doubt he will someday have a theatre of which he may be justly proud.

Chapter 4

Some Characteristics of Negro Drama

Negro drama, whether written by white or Negro authors, has certain common characteristics such as dialect, colorful expressions, superstitions, type characters, and similar plots and settings. These common characteristics bind the drama of the Negro into a composite whole differing from and yet related to that of the white man. From this drama the white author may receive a new and fresher viewpoint with which to enrich that of his own.

Dialect:

The most apparent distinguishing feature of Negro drama is the dialect in which it is written. The dialects vary in the different sections of the South, but the difference is in the word used rather than the way of pronouncing it. In the written play, the dialect presents more of a problem than in the spoken, because a Negro cast does not usually have to be coached for dialect unless the parts portrayed are those of very primitive or very ignorant Negroes. Most of the authors leave out the "ings" in the written play in order to simplify the reading of it. The words are spelled as they are intended to be pronounced, some of the most common examples being "yuh" for you, "heah" for here, and "ah" for I. The difference in

dialect is most noticeable when educated Negroes are in the same play with uneducated ones. The educated Negro talks very little differently from a white person, especially a white southerner. When the Negro is in the same class with the other Negroes and attempting to use better speech than they, he is usually self-conscious about it and occasionally lapses into the dialect of those around him. He is always subject to their ridicule, as might be expected. This is true of Abraham in the play In Abraham's Bosom.

In Ralph Edmonds play Old Man Pete, the difference in dialect between the parents and children is very extreme. The children live in New York Harlem, and are well educated. The parents have recently come to New York from Virginia, and still use the "plantation dialect". They are like little children in their amazement at the sights to be seen in the city, and they often embarrass their children by such naive expressions as: "Why up heah we's gut trains under de groun' an' trains in de air". They still refer to their children as "chilluns" to the amusement of their more sophisticated neighbors.

The dialect of the Negro plays is a refreshing quality, and because of this the folk plays seem to be more typical of the Negro than the plays which concern the more educated of the race.

Colorful Expressions:

Although the dialect is a distinctive note in the Negro

play, it does not add so much to it as do the colorful, descriptive terms so typical to the speech of the Negroes. The Negro is not particular in his choice of language; he says what he means to say, making comparisons as he finds them in his everyday life. So, in the first line of The Prayer Meeting by Paul Green, Lorrina impatiently exclaims to her sister: "What'n the name o' God ails you, a-setting there like the dead lice was dropping off'n you".

In the same colorful manner, Aunt Zella, in her contempt for education, mutters: "Cose he aint lousy wid learning lak you, Lalie".[18]

Even in the presence of death, Dreamy speaks to his grandmother in a jokingly reassuring manner: "Wha'd'yuh mean pullin' dat bull 'bout croaking on me? Shoo! Trying to kid me, aint yo'? Shoo! You live to plant de flowers on my grave, see if you don'".[19]

Another example of colorful speech may be found in The Rider of Dreams by Ridgely Torrence. Lucy is concerned about the morals of her little son, Booker, and says earnestly: "You shorely is on de way to de fiah, but I'm goin' to pluck you out ef it skins you alive".

Enos, in his scorn for the No.'Count Boy, scornfully ex-

18. The End of the Row by Paul Green

19. The Dreamy Kid by Eugene O'Neill

claims to Pheelie: "Dat lizard aint strong enough to kill a flea with a sledge hammer".[20]

These expressions are native to the Negro drama, and a distinctly original addition to the whole field of drama. Of course these are more typical of the older, uneducated Negro, but they are so colorful that they appeal to the white man as representative of the whole race.

Setting:

The setting does not vary much from play to play in Negro drama. More often than not, the action takes place in a cabin on a southern plantation. It is usually in a one-room wooden structure. Everything about the place has a poverty-stricken appearance. The furniture invariably consists of an old couch, a rickety table, and a few chairs. In spite of the drab interior, there is usually an attempt at brightness in the way of colored pictures and gay curtains. The play Old Man Pete is an exception. This play takes place in Harlem in a cozily furnished flat. The furniture, while not the most expensive kind, shows good taste, and the whole interior of the room gives a genuine atmosphere of comfort. In a few of the plays, like Green Pastures and Emperor Jones, the setting is entirely imaginative, and for the most part the action takes place out of doors.

20. The No 'Count Boy by Paul Green

Type Characters:

With the exception of a few outstanding characters like Porgy, "De Lawd", and Emperor Jones, the Negro plays may be said to consist of a set of "type characters".

The old Negro woman may be typified by Granny McLean in Paul Green's White Dresses. She is a big, black, bony, old woman dressed in a slat bonnet, brogan shoes, a dark dress, and a checkered apron. She is an habitual snuff-taker. Her eyes are sunken, and she has high cheek bones and a big, flat nose. This Negro woman, varying little as to clothes or features, is to be found in nearly every play dealing with Negro plantation life.

Bullock Williams in The New Window, is typical of the cruel, abusive husband. He is usually a mean, tough-looking, middle-aged Negro. He has a heavy growth of stubby beard, and a diabolical expression on his face. Bullock's wife, Lizzie, is also a type character. She is thin, emaciated, and prematurely old. She is dressed in dark clothes and her matted hair hangs about her shoulders. Her movements are slow and uncertain, clearly showing that she is afraid of her husband.

The young Negro girl may be typified by Pheelie in Paul Green's No 'Count Boy. She is anywhere from seventeen to twenty, neatly although cheaply dressed. She is usually more idealistic, more hopeful of the future than the older Negroes, and she dreams of a time when she will be able to enjoy some of

the luxuries of white folks.

Abraham, in Paul Green's In Abraham's Bosom, is the ambitious Negro boy desirious of an education. He is young, tall, and powerfully built. He is dressed somewhat neater than the older Negroes, but the thing that differentiates him more than this, is the mark of will and intelligence on his forehead. His very attitude commands the respect of the other Negroes. He is always reading books, and making speeches in an endeavor to win the others to his way of thinking, and defeat, when it comes, is hard for him to comprehend.

The white characters in Negro plays are always inferior to the colored ones, even when the play is written by a white man. The slave owner or plantation overseer is cruel and abusive and treats the Negroes like animals rather than human beings. The Negroes hate and fear him. Such is the case in Willis Richardson's Flight of the Natives. When the overseer enters the cabin the Negroes crouch and cower before him, and tremblingly obey his commands. In Eugene O'Neill's Emperor Jones, the white man, Smithers, is contrasted unfavorably with the Negro, Brutus Jones. Even the sound of their names, Smithers and Brutus, seems to denote something of the contrast. In They Shall Not Die by John Wexley, the white officers are inhumanly cruel to the youthful colored prisoners.

Around these few type characters, nearly all the Negro plays are plotted. This limited characterization is almost un-

avoidable since so many of the plays are about slavery and plantation life. In those days, there was not much chance for individuality in character, and the people were very much alike. It is only with the education and broadening of the Negro that we may expect very individual characters.

Plots:

The plots of most of the present available Negro plays are not very different from one another. In nearly all the plays, the Negro is mainly concerned with putting up a valiant struggle for existence in the face of an unkind fate. Some of the younger ones, like Abrahem[21] and Abe[22] are struggling for an education. In most of the one-act plays, the plots are mere incidents, hardly enough to be given the name of plot. In nearly every case, the struggle is one which ends in the tragic defeat of the Negro.

Superstitions:

The Negro race is noted for its unusual susceptibility to superstition, and Negro drama abounds in it. Paul Green who lived close to and intimately knew the Negro, has based whole plays such as The Man Who Died at Twelve O'clock, Supper For the Dead, and In Aunt Mahaly's Cabin on this element of superstition. In The Man Who Died at Twelve O'clock, a superstitious old man is made to believe that he is carried away by the Devil, and then returned to earth. In Supper For the Dead, the vision

21. In Abraham's Bosom by Paul Green

22. The Dreamy Kid by Eugene O'Neill

of a dead girl is brought before her father's eyes to haunt him for the terrible wrong he did her. In In Aunt Mahaly's Cabin, the fears of the convicts take shape before their eyes and terrify them. Even Emperor Brutus Jones is superstitious, although he has laughed at the "fool bush niggers"[23] for being so gullible. When Jones is alone in the forest and haunted by the numerous "formless fears", he is as easily terrified as the tribe which he once subjected.

In Paul Green's The Hot Iron, Tilsy shrieks at her little boy: "Look at you a-bringing a hoe in dis house, and bad luck wid it!" Granny explains to her son, in the play Cruiter by John Matheus, "Ah knowed dis here disturbance was comin', cause ah seed a light in de sky eb'ry night dis week".

Nat Turner, in the play by that name by Randolph Edmonds, was guided by his visions of "white spirits and black spirits engaged in battle", and by the thunder rolling and the sun being darkened to start his insurrection.

In the play The New Window by Randolph Edmonds, the wife, Lizzie,explains that she has premonitions of something about to happen, especially since her husband has cut a new window which "means trouble and death", and the rain "hit's fallin' crosswise--- and dat means death".

These are a few examples of the superstitions which are

23. Emperor Jones by Eugene O'Neill

found in nearly every Negro play and which so strangely influence the Negro's life. The educated Negro is able to ignore or laugh at them, but they are still a part of the old Negro, something to be obeyed and regarded with awe. As E. Horace Fitchett explains in his article entitled "Superstition in South Carolina", "Societies in which changes are relatively slow-due to a minimum of contacts with ideas and mechanical devices-are generally guided by life patterns with strong emotional contents and beliefs".[24]

24. "Superstition in South Carolina" by E. Horace Fitchett Crisis Magazine November, 1936.

Chapter 5

The Present and Future of Negro Drama

"Only by isolating the particular body of Negro literature from American literature can we come to a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Negro's place in our national life."[25] This is true of Negro drama--- we must isolate it, see what it has to offer in the way of something new yet genuine, and estimate its worth to American drama as a whole. Regarded in this light, Negro drama today does not seem to be such a vital contribution. The Negro seems to have found his most natural means of expression in music and poetry. He has been surpassed by the white man in the dramatic field, even in the use of his own materials. Up to the past few years, the Negro's work for the American stage has been almost negligible. He lacked experience, background, and more especially an audience. Today the Negro has received encouragement from various sources. There are several experimental theatre groups of which the three main ones are: The Hapgood Players, The Chicago Ethiopian Art Theatre, and The Krigwa Little Theatre of New York and Washington. Encouragement has also been offered by the Crisis and Opportunity Magazines in the form of prize contests.

25. The Negro in Contemporary American Literature by Elizabeth Lay Green

The government has aided the Negro playwright by establishing Federal Theatre groups under the Works Progress Administration. In Boston, this theatre is headed by Ralf Coleman, a Negro who has been an actor, producer, and playwright.

Perhaps most important of all in this work toward the development of a recognizable Negro drama has been that done by the little theatres connected with the southern colleges. These are usually directed by the professors and the plays are written, coached, and acted by the young Negroes interested in a representative drama of their own race. The work done so far in this field is important in that it is indicative of what may some day develop.

The Negro actor does not always adhere to Negro plays as evidenced by the fact that on April 14, 1936, the Federal Theatre in Harlem gave a production of Shakespeare's Macbeth with an all Negro cast. Said one critic after viewing this, "their skins are chocolate, but their souls are the many colors of their laughter".[26] The set for this Macbeth was not the usual grim, castellated Scotland, but Haiti with giant tropical foliage, and the architecture was from the dreams of Touissant L'Ouverture. The costumes were "Emperor Jones gone mad". Not content with three weird sisters, the Negroes had twelve or more witches, some sepia male. But in spite of all this color and gusto, the production was not jazzed. Although the white

26. "Everyone Likes Chocolate" by Robert Littell

audience usually objects to seeing the colored man play anything as high class as Shakespeare, the play was a great success. It was almost as interesting to watch the audience as the play. The white people who thronged the theatre were after something different. As one commentator put it, they wanted something "innocent and richly seasoned, child-like and jungle-spiced which is the gift of the Negro to a more tired, complicated and self-conscious race."

Mr. Ralf Coleman, director of the Federal Theatre Negro Company in Boston, is extremely hopeful about the future of Negro drama. This spring he directed Bloodstream, a Negro play by Frederick Schlick. Bloodstream is a tense, gripping drama in three acts. It is longer than the majority of Negro plays, and, as Mr. Coleman explained to me, does not have to be accompanied by another play to form an evening's entertainment as is usually the case. The play concerns a group of Negro convicts working in a mine. Juke, the leader of the convicts, plans an escape rather than submit to the cruel lashings of the white boss, Knox. The other convicts, loyal to Juke, plan to escape with him. They are hiding in the mine when they overhear the boss planning to send down gas, either to kill them or drive them out. Rather than risk the lives of his companions, Juke surrenders himself. As the play was first written, Juke was a white man, but since Negro and white convicts would never be working in the same mine together in real life, the character was changed. The contrast

with Knox is much greater this way. Bloodstream is a stirring play to witness. It opens with the convicts singing and rhythmically swaying to the slow but steady rise and fall of their axes. Everything is extremely realistic, and the sudden, unexpected explosions and gun shots which occur throughout the play never fail to startle the whole audience. In commenting on his direction of this play, Mr. Coleman mentioned the difficulty a Negro director has in working with men of his own race. The Negroes will respect and work for a white man, but to them, a colored man is on their own level no matter what his education or position. Mr. Coleman said that before being presented, the word "Negro" must be substituted in the script for "Nigger". The Negro may refer to himself as a "Nigger" in his own writing or in private speech, but not before a mixed audience. Another difficulty mentioned by Mr. Coleman was that of satisfying the audience. The producer of Negro plays must consider the fact that he has virtually two audiences, one, the box office audience, the other the Negro audience. The former consists of white people who want to see folk plays and comedy. They come to be entertained and amused, not expecting anything of literary value from a race which they still consider to be so far inferior to their own. The other audience, the Negro one, resents mere folk plays and demands that their race be portrayed in higher types. This task of pleasing two audiences so very different from one another is one of the many difficulties which faces the Negro in his step by step progress toward a theatre of

his own.

Mr. Coleman already sees Negro drama as a steady development from the first Negro actor to serious opera. Negro drama began, he says, with the successful appearance of Ira Aldrich in Shakesperian roles in Europe. In America, the Negro was first given a chance in minstrel roles. Musical comedy was a step upward, with Shuffle Along the crowning glory of this step. The Lafayette Players represent still another step in the history of the Negro's dramatic rise. This was the first Negro stock company in America, and played Broadway white plays successfully, aided by such actors as Frank Wilson, Andrew Bishop, and Rose McClendon. Serious drama came next, with Ridgely Torrence's The Rider of Dreams, Granny Maumee, and Simon, The Cyrenian and Eugene O'Neill's Emperor Jones the first of this type. These plays were followed by many one-act plays by Paul Green, Willis Richardson, and lesser playwrights. The last and final step, the greatest achievement in Negro drama thus far, is the serious opera, Porgy, Heyward's musical version of his own Porgy and Bess. Coleman's brother played the part of Crown in this drama.

Mr. Coleman is himself the author of several plays, among them, The Girl From Bam, Paradox, The Reverend Takes His Text, and Swanee Review. Like so many Negro plays written within the past few years, these are not yet published, and therefore not available to the general public.

The optimism of Mr. Coleman is not shared by some others in this field. Mr. Franklin Peters, Director of the Little Theatre at Fisk University, Nasheville, Tennessee, maintains that little has been done in the field of Negro drama. To his knowledge, only one such play has been written by a student of Fiske University. This play is entitled Cheated, and is by Vivian Dreer. According to Mr. Peters it is "scarcely a play". Mr. Peters further says: "At present the Negro drama is worthless. His attempt at playwrighting is scarcely more than propaganda, thrown together in easily conceivable fashion. From every indication, his possibilities in this field are very remote. The best plays dealing with the Negro have been written by white authors. I sincerely wish that there were more plays written by Negroes so that I could produce them. I have produced one or two, but I did so with regret."[27]

Mrs. Loretto Carroll Baily, director of a Negro University group at Chapel Hill, North Carolina, is not much more hopeful concerning the future of Negro drama. In a letter to me she says: "In the course of my work, I read all the plays I could find written by and for Negroes. Unfortunately my own particular group was not at all interested in producing these plays, and not nearly so interested in reading them as I was. My group and a number of other Negro school groups I got to know actually felt that most playwrights, Negro or white, writing about the

27. Letter from Mr. Peters received April 9, 1937.

Negro, were really exploiting him. They felt that when I wanted them to do Negro plays I wanted it because I thought that they couldn't do "white plays". That attitude is a serious obstacle to the development of Negro playwrights, if the attitude is at all prevalent.

" I did discover, too, mant interesting Negro plays existed only in manuscript or in mimeograph copies. Mrs. Rowena Jelliffe of the Gilpin Players, Cleveland, explained to me that publishers would not bring out many Negro plays because there was so little demand for them that it did not pay.

"I see greater hope for the Negro drama, as well as for the white, in the keen interest the public schools and colleges are taking in plays."

The reports of these two people who are directly concerned with the work being done on Negro drama are rather discouraging, but Miss Marjorie Patten who made a tour of the South, studying the little theatres there, is more encourageing, when she says: "The Negro folk theatre is on its way in North Carolina. The spirit is alive-- there are plans ahead. In the meantime, Negro groups are acting and enjoying plays, original and not original, but played with a seriousness and vitality that means successful future".[28]

An article by Anne Powell entitled "The Negro and the

28. "The Making of a Native Folk Drama" by Marjorie Patten

Federal Theatre" also has an extremely hopeful outlook. She praises the Federal Theatre project as being the salvation for the Negro race in establishing "a Negro theatre, rooted in the life of its people".[29] Previous to this, the Negro roles were limited, stereotyped, and often uncomplimentary. It is especially amazing to Miss Powell that the Negro "has been able to skyrocket- after nine months work with the Federal Theatre- several hits into this year's theatre season- not only in New York with 'Macbeth', but in other parts of the country as well".[30]

At present there is a dispute as to what type of drama the Negro should present. Some people demand only entertainment, others desire plays of a functional nature, and still others request the classics, both old and new. Miss Powell quotes one young man who worried over the success of Macbeth: "Plays like 'Macbeth' tend to make the Negro theatre too spectacular. The press stresses the Negro's love for riotous color and glamorous productions so much that I am afraid ours will become a 'fad' theatre and so lose in vitality and strength".[31]

Miss Powell is optimistically hopeful that since the groundwork has been laid, the idea of a Negro theatre is no longer a dream.

29. "The Negro and the Federal Theatre" by Anne Powell Crisis Magazine November, 1936.

30. ibid.

31. ibid.

Summary

Negro drama might almost be considered as having its beginning in the year 1917. Previous to this date, there were a few outstanding Negro actors such as Ira Aldrich and Williams and Walker, there were minstrel shows and musical comedies, but nothing which could be termed a real Negro play. For several years, Uncle Tom's Cabin dominated the stage and was the only play with Negro characters known to the white audiences. Uncle Tom was the plantation slave as the white man imagined him, a kindly, good-hearted, old man to whom little children were easily attracted.

In 1919 and the succeeding years, three of America's outstanding dramatists, Ridgely Torrence, Eugene O'Neill, and Paul Green, saw the potentialities of the dark race as dramatic material. Marc Connelly, too, saw in the religion and spirituals of the Negro a drama which was destined to sweep the country, leaving white and black alike a little awed by its simplicity and beauty. John Wexley made use of one of the most famous Negro trials in history, that of the Scottsboro boys charged with the rape of two white girls, for his drama They Shall Not Die, a fierce protest against the inhuman treatment accorded these youthful Negroes. A few years later, Du Bose Heyward had given the theatre a never-to-be-forgotten character, Porgy. Minor playwrights made their contributions in the form of simple one-act plays. In this way Negro drama had its beginning,

receiving its impetus from the white playwrights.

Native contributions have been few, but they must not be judged by the standards set for our drama because of the obstacles which they have had to overcome. Lacking a theatre, money necessary to publish the plays, even an audience, the Negro playwright has had slight encouragement until the last few years. Today, aided by the Government Federal Theatres, magazine contests, and the Negro schools and colleges of the South, the Negro is becoming intensely interested in the idea of a drama of his own. Willis Richardson, Georgia Douglas Johnson, and Randolph Edmonds are among the most prolific dramatists, but even they have attempted little beyond the one-act play. Free from intellectual obsessions, the Negro race has offerings to make in the way of rich voices, graceful, expressive movements, the color and passion of his primitive soul, and the beauty of his folk songs.

The Negro actor has already demonstrated what he can do with Shakespeare. He can give novelty-seeking publics an entertainment different from anything they have ever seen. The legitimate stage is not looking for that from the Negro; it is looking for something greater even than Green Pastures, Emperor Jones, or Porgy, something that is a part of the Negro race itself. We need not give undue praise to those plays which the Negro has already produced, perhaps they are not exceeded in the hundreds of plays yet to be published, but we can be

optimistic about the progress that the Negro has made since receiving encouragement. Let us hope with W. E. Burghardt Du Bois that someday a "Black Ibsen, Moliere, or Negro Tolstoi may arise".[32]

32. "Can the Negro Save the Drama?" Theatre 12,68 July, 1923.

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